

The SPL Journal of Literary Hermeneutics

A Biannual International Journal of Independent Critical Thinking
Double-blind Peer-reviewed and Open Access Journal in English



Volume 4 Issue 1 Winter Edition 2024 e-ISSN 2583-1674 Page no. 206-215

www.literaryhrm.org
www.cavemarkpublications.com



Climate Change, Literature and the Non-Human Agency: An Analysis of Amitav Ghosh's Select Works

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Review Article

Keywords:

Climate Change, Anthropocene, Literature, Non-human Agency, Amitav Ghosh

Article History

Received:

March 19, 2024

Revised:

March 27, 2024

Accepted:

March 30, 2024



ISSN 2583-1674 (SPL-JLH)



Abstract

Aims: *The paper titled “Climate Change, Literature, and Non-human Agency: An Analysis of Amitav Ghosh's Selected Works” aims to explore Ghosh's viewpoints on Climate Change and its effects on both humans and non-humans, while also investigating the contribution of literature in tackling this global issue.*

Methodology and Approaches: *The study is grounded in qualitative research, delving into examining three literary pieces by Amitav Ghosh. Drawing heavily from the author's seminal theoretical work, “The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable,” the paper also scrutinizes his two other fictional narratives, specifically “The Gun Island” and “The Living Mountain.”*

Outcome: *Ghosh criticizes the Western canonical literature for ignoring climate change in their works and waging war against Nature. He believes that to mitigate the risks of climate change and save our planet from its disastrous effects, humans must return to Nature. Ghosh thinks returning to nature is the ultimate solution for today's planetary crisis.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *Ghosh like many other activists believes that climate change is human-induced. He blames the modernist writers for ignoring the earth and promoting industrialism, and considers them “complicit in the great derangement.” His works tell the stories of human and non-human predicaments due to climate disruptions and ecological degradation. His recent books, like Gun Island, and The Living Mountain depict the unfavorable conditions of non-humans like trees, mountains, snakes, dolphins, crabs, spiders, and other such entities as a result of climate change.*

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This paper is available online on www.literaryherm.org and it was published by CaveMark Publications, India.

The study of weather and climate in particular refers to meteorology, yet in general, it is a decisive and vital part of all living organisms and hence of great importance. In fact, our planet's climate has had fluctuations throughout its geologic history, starting from the prehistoric Great Ice Age to the most recent Little Ice Age, all of which have been marked as natural. Humans' role in changing the climate is of great concern today. There is consensus among the majority of climate experts that proves our earth's average temperature has risen to 1°C in one hundred years, which marks a rapid change. There is a lot of evidence to support this claim. Rainfall distribution is changing, ice is melting, the ocean is becoming more acidic, and the sea level is rising (Eggleton 121). Furthermore, as Tony Eggleton writes, there are changes in the behavior of plants and animals compared to the past, with plants budding and flowering earlier and insects emerging from dormancy earlier, which he claims clearly corroborates global warming (16). The main reason for this temperature rise is said to be the quantity of greenhouse gases due to the consumption of fossil fuels which emit large quantities of carbon into the atmosphere. What is of the utmost concern is the rate of change in the climate. Scientists warn that if the current trends continue and carbon emissions double, the temperature will rise to 2°C in the next century. It is said that the earth's climate has considerably changed since the Industrial Revolution, and the major cause has been human actions, hence the term "Anthropocene," or "the human epoch." Research shows that "modern warming is a consequence of non-natural (anthropogenic) forcing (Mayewski et al. 10). Human activity has noticeably transformed the land surface, oceans, and atmosphere, and re-ordered life on Earth.

In his book, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Amitav Ghosh explores the connections between literature and environmental occurrences as well as the politics and history of climate change. He acknowledges anthropogenic climate change by stating that "the freakish weather events of today are animated by cumulative human actions" and that "global warming today has a more intimate connection with humans than did previous climate phenomena," implying that we reap what we sowed (43).

Amitav Ghosh criticizes the modern arts and literature of today for their negligence about the natural catastrophes and for playing a part in “the great derangement,” and thus being complicit in the climate crisis (162). He further states that literature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries was and is political, ignoring nature and promoting industrialism. He blames writers of his generation for not paying attention to the consequences of industrialization and, like some of his predecessors, for not caring about nature and the environment. He expresses surprise at how they, including himself, have ignored and unnoticed the earth and atmosphere in the age of carbon emissions (166). His criticism is targeted at the mainstream literature that did not take this issue seriously and “remained unaware of the crisis on our doorstep” (167). Ghosh wonders “why [the literary imagination] is increasingly open to certain conceptions of the political while remaining closed to an issue that concerns our collective survival” (170). He poses the same question to the political bodies. Ghosh warns that if the politicians and the governments do not take action, the future generations would “look back upon the great derangement [and]... [would] certainly blame [them]... for their failure to address the climate crisis”. He considers the writers “equally culpable” condemning them for forgetting their responsibilities and for concealing the truth in their writings (181). He adds that the future museum-goers who want to read about today’s catastrophes as a result of humans' greed [would] decry the writers for leaving them in an information vacuum and [would] call this period “the great derangement” (14-15).

He expresses his concern about the lack of a space for climate change in imaginative writings in the literary narratives. He considers this lack an imaginative and cultural failure. He laments that “climate change casts a much smaller shadow within the landscape of literary fiction” (10). He believes that “the climate crisis is a cultural crisis, and thus a crisis of imagination,” and that “culture generates desires for vehicles and appliances, for certain types of gardens and dwellings—that are among the primary drivers of the carbon economy” (12).

Ghosh, while expressing concerns about the negligence of the arts, literature, and political and economic parties, also mentions the improvements and

progress that have taken place in the climate change discourse. He observes that while there are bleak aspects to climate change, there are also features that indicate signs of hope, for example, a widening activism around the globe and, most importantly, the engagement of religious bodies in the politics of climate change like Pope Francis who published his influential encyclical letter in 2015 (213).

In his seminal book, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Ghosh discusses the position of nonhumans in modern literature, particularly in the Anthropocene. He denounces modernity's idea of freedom and believes that humans "have never been free of non-human constraints." He writes that nonhuman forces and systems have no place in this calculus of liberty. "Indeed, being independent of nature was considered to be one of the defining characteristics of freedom itself," Ghosh asserts (160). He maintains that "there was a radical turn away from the non-human to the human in the art and literature of the 20th century" and that "human consciousness, agency, and identity came to be placed at the center of every kind of aesthetic enterprise" (160). He writes:

It was in exactly the period in which human activity was changing the earth's atmosphere that the literary imagination became radically centered on the human. Inasmuch as the non-human was written about it was not within the mansion of serious fiction but rather in the outhouses to which science fiction and fantasy had been banished (*The Great Derangement* 88).

He maintains that it was not only artistic but also political in the Cold War. American abstract expressionism confronted the USSR's social realism. Both focused on humans rather than nature. He also highlights political figures who had opposing views on nature. The founder of the People's Republic of China, Mao Zedong, declared war on nature. Jawahar Lal Nehru was enamored with modernity and wanted to construct dams and industries across India (161).

He criticizes Cartesian dualism, which believes that the mind is separate from the body and that only humans possess the mind while all other animals are without awareness and consciousness and only have instincts. He states that "many other animals possess intelligence and agency" (86). Ghosh supports his

claim by declaring that animals' and generally non-humans' agency is evident in “traditions of narrative” as well as in “systems of beliefs.” He gives examples from the epics of the *Iliad and Odyssey*, in which non-human agencies like gods and animals fuel the machine of narration. He quotes a Jewish theologian who admits that in Judaism, God is seen through or found in nature (86-87).

Ghosh claims that today the agency of non-humans is evident in movies, such as those about zombies, werewolves, witches, aliens, and so on, and that these films and books are best sellers; however, he asks why this awareness or recognition of non-human agency was suppressed in modes of expression and thought in the first place over the centuries (87-88). He responds to his question by citing the god of modernity (the time) as the catalyst “that allows the work of partitioning to proceed within the novel... and erase every archaic reminder of Man's kinship with the non-human” (94). According to Ghosh, modernity has excluded nonhumans from the novels.

The book is a story about opening a knot or a puzzle in a Bengali Sundarban legend: the story of the Gun Merchant. It turns out that the merchant had gone to Venice, Italy. It is a story within a story. It unties the knots of the puzzle and rebuses the narrative of the Gun Merchant. It tells the story of Deen, a scholar and dealer of rare books who returns from New York to the Sunderbans in West Bengal to solve the mystery and tale of Bonduki Sada-gar, literally “The Gun Merchant,” and his persecution by Manasa Devi, the mythological goddess of snakes. The book explicitly reflects climate change and its unfortunate consequences.

In this novel, Ghosh foregrounds the terrible predicament of non-humans as caused by climate change and environmental degradation. One major issue caused by climate disruptions is the migration of humans as well as nonhumans, the other living species. In the novel, Ghosh displays the displacement of spiders from an unknown place to Venice, Italy. Deen, the narrator observes a poisonous spider, a type that has never been seen before in Cinta's flat. Cinta, a character in the book, explains that “the brown recluse spider is extending its range into places where it wasn't found before—like this part of Italy” (199). She adds that the

movement of the spider is not natural but “because of things human beings have done” thus highlighting humans’ negligence towards other creatures.

Habitat change and the migration of species are important themes in the book. In the last part of the text, Ghosh illustrates this dilemma. While the refugee boat is on the sea, it is surrounded by schools of cetaceans, whales, and dolphins and circled by millions of migrating birds. Piya, a character in the book, says: “But animal migrations are being hugely impacted by climate change... I'm sure we'll see more of these intersecting events in the future” (261). Thus, Ghosh foresees and alerts readers to the potential effects of climate change. Ghosh also illustrates the plight of dolphins threatened by industrialization and the effects of climate change. Sea level rise is one of the effects of global warming, and Ghosh closely looks at it and how it hurts marine animals, like freshwater dolphins. He writes:

As sea levels rose, and the flow of freshwater diminished, salt water had begun to intrude deeper upstream, making certain stretches too saline for the dolphins. They had avoided some of the waterways... [and] begun to venture further and further upriver.... Inevitably some had been ensnared by fishermen’s nets and some had been hit by motorboats and steamers (88).

According to Ghosh, industrial facilities and refineries near rivers and oceans discharge poisonous wastes into the water, which eventually kill cetaceans. Another species affected by climate change in the novel is the shipworms. Cinta says that “more and more of these are invading Venice, with the warming of the lagoon’s water. They eat up the wood from the inside, in huge quantities... They are literally eating the foundations of the city” (213).

The Living Mountain is Ghosh’s fictional book work published in 2022 is explicitly about the Anthropocene, global warming, and its disastrous aftermaths. It tries to draw readers’ attention to the destructive risks of global warming in the Himalayan Mountains, which are a huge reservoir of the world’s fresh water in the form of snow and ice. It is a story about a village on the outskirts of the Himalayas. The villagers revere the mountain for providing

them with water and food. They believe that the mountain is alive and that it will take care of them (7). It introduces the term “Anthropocene” and describes it as a “new coinage.”

In this book, Ghosh subtly points out that people's perceptions of climate or atmospheric conditions are limited to science. Maansi, the narrator, looks up a list of texts about the Anthropocene. She picks up one book, expecting it to be a science book with “lots of numbers and charts,” but it turns out to be about the fate of a people on a distant island. Ghosh implies that contrary to what people perceive about climate change texts as being “science-y”, they are not only that but also the stories of humans' and non-humans' predicaments. Therefore, he establishes a connection between literature and science, as he does in his other book, *The Nutmeg's Curse*.

There are two groups of people in the book. The first is called “The Anthropoi,” which stands for Western colonizers. The second is called “The Varvaroi,” which may stand for the eastern nations, particularly India and China, as Ghosh refers to them in *The Great Derangement* for their contribution to climate change. The villagers believe that the mountain will protect them and take care of them on condition that they tell stories about it, sing songs about it, dance for it, and never set foot on its slopes. Ghosh thus addresses writers and artists to give nonhumans a voice. Storytelling is a way to transfer the tradition of respecting nature and the environment to the next generation.

The invasion of nature began during colonial times and accelerated with industrialization and the rise of capitalism. The mountain, a symbol of nature, tells the villagers to leave it alone and not intrude or invade it. Ghosh tries to prove that traditional beliefs about nature and return to it are some ways to protect and save the planet. He considers modernity to be the cause of global warming and the exploitation of nature. Therefore, he challenges modernity by reclaiming past ancestral traditions and beliefs about nature and the environment.

When the Himalayan Mountain shakes and avalanches, it ushers in the Anthropocene. The terrified villagers ask the adepts to listen to the mountain and tell them what is happening. They put their ear to the ground and listen. The

mountain tells them that “a cycle of time has ended and another one has begun: the cycle of tribulation” and that armed strangers from far lands are coming to the valley (13). The mountain warns the villagers about the arrival of colonizers and exploiters and thus heralds the end of one geologic epoch and the beginning of another epoch which is the Anthropocene, described by Ghosh as the cycle of “tribulation.” “The Anthropoi had dirtied the slopes and covered them with trash,” Ghosh writes (21). They extracted nature’s resources and dirtied them in response. This also shows the attitude and disrespect of strangers towards other people’s nature and environment. So the wastes of the anthropoid is another factor in destroying nature, and the atmosphere, and causing global warming.

Therefore, Ghosh suggests that we all should return to nature, near the end of the book. Ghosh denounces humans’ interference with nature and indicates that nature should be left alone. He also implies that because nature is more powerful than humans, it can take care of itself. Therefore, reversing the Anthropocene means reversing human influences on nature and returning to and compromising with it.

While there are climate change deniers, there is much evidence that proves that the earth’s climate has changed and the sole factor has been humans, and hence this era has been referred to as the Anthropocene. Amitav Ghosh, realizing the significance of environmental protection and the potential risks of global warming, has incorporated such issues into his writings. His seminal work, *The Great Derangement*, explores the history of anthropogenic climate change and discusses the world’s politics involved in it. He talks about the responsibilities of writers towards the planet’s crisis. He blames the modernist writers for ignoring the earth and promoting industrialism, and considers them “complicit in the great derangement.” His works tell the stories of human and non-human predicaments due to climate disruptions and ecological degradation. His recent books, like *Gun Island*, *The Living Mountain*, and *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, as evident from their titles, depict non-human conditions. Mountains, dolphins, plants, and other nonhuman entities recur in his works. *The Nutmeg’s Curse* revolves around the

nutmegs, a valuable spice, and the volcanic mountains of Maluku, which have a deep meaning to the inhabitants.

Similarly, *The Living Mountain* tells the story of the Himalaya Mountain, which also has profound meaning and is respected by the surrounding inhabitants. *Gun Island* depicts endangered spiders, dolphins, and birds due to environmental degradation and climate change. In a concluding sentence in his book *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Ghosh asserts: "It is essential now, as the prospect of planetary catastrophe comes ever closer, that those nonhuman voices be restored to our stories. The fate of humans, and all our relatives, depends on it" (257).

In conclusion of the book *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh asserts that although it is already too late for this generation to make a difference in the climate issue, if the groundwork for these efforts is established now, the succeeding generation will be conscious and not make the same mistakes as their predecessors. He thinks that during the climate crisis, which he refers to as the "great derangement," humans isolated themselves and broke away from nature and the environment, and he is hopeful that with the struggles of today's generation, future generations will reconnect and make peace with nature and deepen their kinship (217).

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